

BOOK REVIEW

BRENT BERLIN. 1992. **Ethnobiological Classification: Principles of Categorization of Plants and Animals in Traditional Societies.** (ISBN 0-691-09469-1, hbk.). Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, U.S.A. \$29.00. Illustrated with b&w line drawings.

As more and more anthropology and biology departments begin to collaborate and ethnobiology becomes a bona fide program, it's hard to imagine *Ethnobiological Classification* not being an essential text. It is because of this book, and the debates it sparked, that folk biological taxonomies have become such a hot topic for a better part of the nineties and worthy of so much further investigation in the coming millennium. It is fitting that one of the nation's leading ethnobiology programs, the University of Georgia, Athens, is run by the author and his wife, Elois.

Divided into two major parts, "Plan" and "Process," Berlin discusses the foundations of ethnobiological classification inferred from an analysis of descriptions of individual systems and the underlying processes involved in the functioning and evolution of ethnobiological systems in general. Essentially this book is a revision and summary of the many articles Berlin co-authored with Dennis Breedlove and Peter Raven in the late sixties and the articles he continued to publish on his own throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s. These articles lead many more budding ethnobiologists to chime in on the issue. Eugene Hunn, Cecil Brown, Terence Hays, to name a few, either agreed, disagreed, or agreed to disagree with Berlin. This debate contributed a great deal to the overall knowledge of ethnobiological classification and theory. It is only when such topics become thoroughly researched and continually challenged that the essence of the subject is revealed and worthy of inclusion in a college program.

Part one is divided into four chapters, discussing the "Making of a Comparative Ethnobiology," "The Primacy of Generic Taxa in Ethnobiological Classification," "The Nature of Specific Taxa," and "Natural and Not So Natural Higher Order Categories." Berlin tackles the essentials of the folk classification debate, intellectualists and utilitarian approaches, the changing data presentation as a reflection of a changing theory, perceptual salience, general nomenclatural properties of specific taxa, and folk taxonomic ranking to name a few. Part two comes in 3 chapters: "Patterned Variation in Ethnobiological Knowledge," "The Nonarbitrariness of Ethnobiological Nomenclature," and "The Substance and Evolution of Ethnobiological Categories." This is where the book becomes more than just a book on ethnobiological classification, but a book that asks further questions and challenges those anthropologists who see reality as a "set of culturally constructed, often unique and idiosyncratic images, little constrained by the parameters of an outside world." Berlin looks for variation in the patterns of ethnobiological knowledge and the biological ranges of Folk Taxa, discusses experiments on sound symbolism, and the typological speculations on the evolution of ethnobiological categories. The book ends with a proper bibliography, author index, indices of scientific and ethnobiological names, and a general subject index.

From a student's perspective the best thing I can say about the book is that it pushed me into the library and taught me an essential lesson in research, that often the most important part of an article is its bibliography. Not only did I get the necessary background on ethnobiological classification theories, I also looked further and began to understand the questions Berlin was tackling and started asking my own. But, his thorough citations of the articles that challenged and/or corroborated with his ideas made research both enjoyable, but perhaps more importantly, comprehensive. I wasn't left with one guy's theory on ethnobiological classification, I got the full debate.—
Kevin D. Janni.